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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic

I. Introduction

1. This report is submitted in compliance with the request of the Security Council contained in the statement issued by its President on 26 September 2001 (S/PRST/2001/25), in which the Council requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed of the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA). This report follows up on the interim report of 19 October 2006 on the Central African Republic (S/2006/828). It covers the period from November to December 2006 and summarizes the situation in its political, socio-economic, humanitarian and security aspects and with regard to human rights.

II. Political situation

2. The political situation during the reporting period was marked by activities on the part of rebel groups in the northern of the country, particularly in the Vakaga prefecture close to Darfur in the Sudan and in Ouham and Ouham Pendé prefectures in the north-west. Long thought to be ordinary "roadblockers", then considered armed bandits, these armed men are now recognized by the Central African authorities as rebel groups who seek to overthrow the regime of President François Bozizé.

3. Three of these rebel movements, which have become very active over time, have formed a coalition, the Union de Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement, whose members attacked and occupied the city of Birao, capital of Vakaga prefecture, on Monday, 30 October 2006, and the neighbouring cities of Ouanda-Djallé and Sam Ouandja. The Government of the Sudan has denied accusations by the Central African Republic that it is supporting the rebellion. It has stated that, on the contrary, it wishes to establish, develop and maintain good-neighbourly relations with the Central African Republic. A high-level Sudanese mission, which visited Bangui on 11 November 2006, reiterated this message from the Sudan.

4. Those involved in the rebellion rampant in the northern part of the Central African Republic include the Armée pour la Restauration de la République et la Démocratie, led by Lieutenant Larma, now in detention; the Front Démocratique du

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Peuple Centrafricain, led by Abdoulaye Miskine; and the Union des Forces Républicaines, led by Lieutenant Florian Ndjadder. The Central African Government believes former President Ange-Félix Patassé to be complicit with these insurgents, and some believe that the Union des Forces Républicaines and the rebels in the west are seeking to join forces in order to adopt a common strategy. The nature of the financial and political support received by the rebel movement is still not known with any certainty.

5. In their advance towards the southern part of the country, the Union des Forces Républicaines rebels attacked the city of Ndélé, capital of Bamingui-Bangoran prefecture, approximately 433 kilometres south-west of Birao, on Monday, 27 November 2006. A counteroffensive launched by Government forces, supported by French contingents and contingents of the Multinational Force (FOMUC) of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, CEMAC, resulted in the retaking of the city of Birao on 27 November, the liberation of Ndélé the same day and later, in December, the liberation of the towns of Sam-Ouandja and Ouanda-Djallé. The international community has unanimously condemned the rebels' actions and opposed all attempts at an unconstitutional seizure of power.

6. Many actions have been taken in parallel in order to find a solution to this political and military crisis. On 7 November 2006, President François Bozizé, the mayors of arrondissements, and neighbourhood and group leaders from the city of Bangui engaged in an exchange of views on the steps to be taken to avoid a military escalation. On 8 November 2006, the Head of State addressed the people of Bangui following a peaceful protest march organized by Central African civil society organizations. From 14 to 18 November, the Panel of the Wise organized a series of national consultations with both opposition and presidential political parties, trade unions, civil society organizations and associations and ambassadors accredited to the Central African Republic. At the regional level, the Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union dispatched his Special Envoy for the Central African Republic, who made a working visit to Bangui from 15 to 18 November 2006. On 7 December 2006, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union held a meeting in Addis Ababa aimed at raising the awareness of member States and partners to the urgency and necessity of assisting the Central African Republic.

7. During these meetings, emphasis was placed on the need to expedite the restructuring of the defence and security forces, on the urgency of normalizing good-neighbourly relations with the countries bordering the Central African Republic and on the holding of a national dialogue or consultation. Such a dialogue, to which the Government is not opposed, could be organized with the involvement of all political stakeholders, under the auspices of the Panel of the Wise in partnership with BONUCA. Despite the military successes in taking back cities occupied by the rebels, I remain convinced that dialogue alone will permit a sustainable resolution to the current crisis.

8. Despite the crisis in the northern part of the country, the National Assembly held its second regular session of the year, which opened on 31 October 2006. Although that session was a budgetary one, the deputies considered and adopted bills and draft laws concerning, among other things, the protection of children, the functioning of the National Assembly, education for young men and women and violence against women.

9. At the subregional level, the situation in Darfur and its repercussions for Chad and the Central African Republic, the accusation brought against the Sudan by Chad and the Central African Republic and the persistent tensions between the Governments of these two countries and the Sudanese regime led the President of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Colonel Muammar Al-Qadhafi, to lend his good offices. In that regard, I welcomed the mini-summit held in Tripoli on 22 November 2006 with the participation of the presidents of the three countries directly affected by the crisis in Darfur, together with the President of Egypt, Mohamed Hosni Mubarak. However, I regret to say that a climate of tension persists among the Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic that is not propitious to a rapprochement.

10. The President of the Congo, Dénis Sassou Nguesso, who is also the current Chairperson of the Assembly of the African Union, has expressed his support for the deployment of an international force at the border between the Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic in order to avoid the spread of the crisis in Darfur. In that regard he has reaffirmed his support for Security Council resolution 1706 (2006).

11. Within the framework of the implementation of Security Council resolution 1706 (2006), I sent a multidisciplinary technical assessment mission to the Central African Republic and to Chad from 22 November to 3 December 2006, the conclusions and recommendations of which will enable Security Council members to determine the strategy required in order to follow up on the resolution.

III. Military and security situation

12. The security situation deteriorated considerably in October 2006, particularly with the offensive of the Union des Forces Républicaines rebels in the north-western part of the country. In the capital of Bangui, a resurgence of violent criminal hold-ups was noted during the reporting period.

13. In the provinces, in particular in the northern and north-western regions, insecurity is even more acute owing to the combined actions of rebel groups and "roadblockers" and reprisals by the defence and security forces. The reprisals sometimes involve retaliation against the civilian population, whom the members of the Presidential Guard deployed in the field generally consider to be complicit in the rebellion. This has caused displacement of population, as people flee for safety to the fields or forests or neighbouring countries. Such is the case of a number of Peulh herdsmen who have temporarily settled in Cameroon. In the north-eastern part of the country, the attack and seizure of the villages of Birao, Ouanda-Djallé and Sam-Ouandja by Union des Forces Républicaines rebels caused at least 400 people to flee to the Sudanese town of Am Dafok on the border with the Central African Republic.

14. The restructuring of the defence and security forces is going forward and continues to benefit from the technical support of BONUCA. The same is true of the ex-combatant reintegration and community support project, which has entered its final phase. I must note with regret that, in spite of the efforts of the Government and the results obtained under the programme, the proliferation of light weapons still occurs, primarily because of the porous nature of the borders of the Central African Republic.

15. Since June, the BONUCA Civilian Police Section has continued its activities to strengthen the capacity of the Central African police and gendarmerie in partnership with the French Police International Technical Cooperation Service.

Moreover, the BONUCA military team has helped to train many contingents of the Central African Armed Forces. The training has helped to build the professional capacity of the recipients and contributed to the cohesion of the various corps.

IV. Socio-economic situation and outlook

16. The year 2006 was marked by further growth in gross domestic product. Public finances improved slightly; estimated revenues exceeded the budgeted amount of 67 billion CFA francs. However, public expenditures increased owing to the conflict in the northern part of the country and to the increase in subsidies due to the rise in the price of oil. Experts estimate that overall Central African GDP should reach 3 per cent this year.

17. In July 2006, the African Development Bank approved a US$ 4.9 million grant to the Central African Republic for a national economic management capacity recovery programme. On 28 November 2006 the Executive Board of the World Bank approved a transaction of nearly $82 million allowing the Central African Republic to clear its arrears. The International Monetary Fund proposed to its Executive Board that it should approve an agreement under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility for a three-year period (2007-2009).

18. The financial situation of the Central African Republic should continue to improve thanks to the debt relief anticipated as from mid-June 2007, when the country will reach decision point under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Debt Initiative, which is indispensable for the mobilization of resources necessary to finance the country's reconstruction efforts.

V. Humanitarian situation and operational activities for development

19. The humanitarian situation in the Vakaga and Haute-Kotto prefectures is being closely scrutinized. In the northern and north-western parts of the country, particularly in the Kabo/Batangafo/Kaga Bandoro and Paoua triangle, confrontations between rebel groups and government forces have caused the displacement of from 15,000 to 20,000 people, whose flight has made it harder for them to receive humanitarian assistance.

20. Collaboration among agencies of the United Nations system and the partnership established between those agencies and the international non-governmental organizations operating in the field has facilitated the delivery of emergency assistance to those affected by the conflict in the Central African Republic. For example, 50,000 displaced persons have benefited from assistance from the World Food Programme. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has set up a humanitarian network to gather information on the situation of displaced persons and deliver needed assistance to roughly 50,000 people by the end of 2006. The United Nations Children's Fund has continued its activities, which include, among other things, efforts to repair pumps in the north-western part of the country, provide care for malnutrition cases and combat violations of children's rights in the conflict zones.

21. The country team has received a new allocation of US$ 2 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund to finance activities in the areas of health,

sanitation and water supply, coordination, support, protection and multisectoral assistance to internally displaced persons. In addition, the humanitarian community partnership team in the Central African Republic has prepared a coordinated aid programme, which it presented to donors on 12 December 2006. The financing sought is $50 million. The funds collected will make it possible to meet the immediate needs of the internally displaced persons.

22. Operational activities for development have continued in the three areas of cooperation defined in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2004-2006 for the Central African Republic, namely, governance, post-conflict recovery and combating HIV/AIDS.

VI. Human rights situation

23. The lack of security has had a negative impact on the overall human rights situation. Abuses of all kinds have accompanied the various confrontations, ranging from killings to the destruction of basic infrastructure. The presence and actions of armed groups in the northern part of the country, the reprisals of the Central African Armed Forces and the activities of "roadblockers" have been the primary causes of human rights violations in the conflict zones.

24. In the capital, Bangui, the human rights violations reported were due to a resurgence of hold-ups and armed robberies, attributed to unidentified armed gangs but also to some uncontrolled elements of the defence and security forces. In the northern part of the country, many displaced persons are camped in the fields, in very difficult living conditions, in order to escape the abuses of the defence and security forces and rebel groups.

25. With regard to the administration of justice, the situation in general is still marked by the impunity enjoyed by some elements of the defence and security forces, particularly by members of the Presidential Guard.

26. The third regional branch office of the BONUCA Human Rights Section has been operational in Bambari (385 km north-east of Bangui) since 10 October 2006. The branch office launched an awareness-raising and informational campaign on human rights directed at non-governmental organizations and local authorities. The BONUCA Human Rights Section contributed to the process of amending and passing the Central African Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure. Thanks to the support of BONUCA, the authorities began work on a national plan of action for human rights. Moreover, on the initiative of BONUCA, a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of protecting women's rights was conducted as part of the commemoration, on 31 October 2006, of the sixth anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). Lastly, as part of national capacity-building, the BONUCA Human Rights Section conducted a training seminar for law enforcement agents at Bossangoa from 21 to 24 November 2006.

27. The BONUCA Information Unit continues to pursue its task of promoting BONUCA activities. For the celebration of the International Day of Peace on 21 September, the Unit made an audiovisual presentation to Central Africans entitled "The march towards peace", retracing the Central African Republic's slow but progressive movement towards peace and democracy since the uprisings of 1996-1997. The Unit has also continued to provide technical support to the public and private press. It has organized broadcasts on human rights and the ideals of peace in collaboration with the Human Rights Section and arranged training for

representatives from regional units responsible for promoting democracy and reconciliation in the interior of the country. Its work in that regard has been conducted in partnership with the Communications Ministry responsible for national reconciliation.

VII. Comments/recommendations

28. During the reporting period the security situation deteriorated, especially in the northern part of the country and particularly along the borders with Chad and the Sudan. However, this military and political crisis has brought together political and social stakeholders at the national and regional levels to defend the Republic and the country's territorial integrity. A general consensus has developed in favour of dialogue as a means to overcome differences and consolidate peace.

29. In order to ensure national security, it appears essential to sustain and expedite the restructuring of the national defence and security forces, enhance their operational capabilities and solicit from the international community the support necessary for an extension of the mandate of the Multinational Force (FOMUC) beyond 30 June 2007. It should also be borne in mind that the Government of the Central African Republic has called for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1706 (2006) of 31 August 2006.

30. I welcome the efforts of the Security Council to help restore security along the Central African-Sudanese border. I continue to believe that a parallel process of strengthening national democratic institutions and promoting an inclusive dialogue could relieve the current tensions within the country. In that regard, I recently sent a high-level mission conducted by the Department of Political Affairs to explore the outline of such a dialogue in the Central African Republic with Central African social and political stakeholders and CEMAC leaders.

31. On the economic front, I entertain a lively hope that the support provided by agencies of the United Nations system under the UNDAF framework and the assistance granted by the World Bank on 28 November 2006 will open the way for other development partners, leading to a greater mobilization of resources, continuation of the work of reconstruction and the revival of the economy. I urge all partners to support the efforts deployed towards the socio-economic recovery of the Central African Republic and the consolidation of peace and stability in that country in response to the appeal put forward by the African Union's Peace and Security Council on 7 December 2006.

32. I take this opportunity to express my warmest thanks to the Heads of State of the CEMAC countries for their constant and multifaceted support to the Government of the Central African Republic during this period of great political instability and insecurity. I encourage them to continue their efforts to promote greater mobilization of the Republic's partners. For its part, the United Nations will remain active on behalf of the country. By harmonizing our efforts we can combat effectively the insecurity and political instability and the resulting humanitarian consequences, which gravely threaten the stability of the Central African Republic's neighbours and of Central Africa in general.